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ABSTRACT

Many students think of poetry as a meaning to be figured out, a puzzle to be solved--as if poets were forever doomed to write only what they never quite mean and to mean what they never actually write. The struggle to discover meaning becomes acute with that distinctly modern poetry created by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and their contemporaries and heirs. The misconception is that what a person gets from art is meaning and that having gotten it he or she has experienced a work of art. The opposite is true. The more diligently meaning is pursued to the exclusion of all else, the less the work of art is experienced, because the pursuit of meaning alone misses the obvious: all art is physical. The way to "get" art is to take its body and vicariously live the total sensory experience it presents. Eliot's "The Waste Land," Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at A Blackbird," and Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" illustrate the difficulty of teaching the "meaning" of the poem, though each of these demonstrates how physical poetry is. Three possible body-centered activities to motivate students to explore a poem until they begin to imaginatively experience it are: (1) to draw a picture of the poem; (2) to make a video of the poem; and (3) to perform the poem as a play. (TD)

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Reclaiming The Body:
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> Perhaps art has no "meaning," at least not as we understand meaning. Perhaps it is like nature, which simply <u>is</u> and "means" nothing beyond that.
>
> - Carl Jung

The phrase "Reclaiming The Body" has graveyard connotations I never originally intended. It calls to mind some of those old Vincent Price or Boris Karloff movies in which a corpse is disinterred and transported to the well-intentioned but quite mad doctor's laboratory where, surrounded by a profusion of flasks and retorts filled with brightly colored liquids that bubble and fume, the body is brought back to life -- thanks to the arcane learning of the kindly doctor and the efficacy of contemporary chemistry or alchemy or bio-electrical force fields -- or whatever other abracadabra constitutes the soi-disant scientific basis of the revivification of the recently exhumed.

However, this paper has nothing to to with unearthing corpses. It is about teaching modern poetry. Yet having chosen "Reclaiming The Body as its title, I feel obliged to accept those graveyard connotations. More than that, I welcome them. After all, there is a body. It is poetry -- more dead than alive by the time students enter college. And we -- whether we call ourselves English teachers or professors of literature -- are in some way implicated in this death by unnatural causes. Nonetheless, we are also the well-intentioned but quite mad doctors who seek to revive

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that body, though any fool can plainly see it is dead as a mackeral, stiff as a board, cold as an icicle. Utterly beyond recall.

For many of our students, poetry is dead because, ironically, they fail to see it as a body. Instead, they think of it as a meaning to be figured out, a puzzle to be solved, so they can finally know, with some degree of certitude, "what the poet was trying to say" -- as if those poor pathetic poets were forever doomed to write only what they never quite mean and to mean what they never actually write.

This struggle to discover meaning becomes acute with that distinctly modern poetry created by Eliot, Pound, Stevens and their contemporaries and heirs. Attempting to make sense of their work, students go symbol sleuthing and meaning mongering in the mistaken belief -- which we teachers are, intentionally or not, guilty of fostering -- that a poem, like a math problem, has a right answer. Perhaps four out of every five of our students exhibit this Right-Answer attitude toward poetry. The rest of them believe that anything in a poem can symbolize just about anything not in the poem, because poetry "means whatever you want it to mean." Opposed to the only-one-right-answer attitude toward poety, this infinite-number-of-right-answers attitude is deceptive: appearing to democratically embrace all possibilities, it in fact denies all possibilities, for what can mean anything actually means nothing. These two opposed attitudes are based on the same misconception about poetry -- about art in general.

The misconception is that what we get from art is meaning and that having got it we have experienced a work of art. In fact, the opposite is true. The more diligently we pursue meaning to the exclusion of all else, the less we experience a work of art, because the pursuit of meaning alone blinds us to the obvious: all art is physical. All art has a physical body. The way to "get" art is to take its

body into our body and to vicariously live the total sensory experience it presents. Only then can it begin to mean anything to us. In other words, physical apprehension [from apprehendre, to seize] precedes intellectual comprehension. If that physical apprehension is vivid enough, it may even eliminate the necessity for intellectual comprehension.

Children, especially younger children, already know this. They don't waste time trying to figure things out. They simply live in the world. When presented with a work of art -- a nursery rhyme, for example -- they respond to it as they respond to the world: immediately and without question. Suppose, for example, we enthusiastically recite these lines to a group of young children:

> Hey, diddle, diddle,
> The cat and the fiddle,
> The cow jumped over the moon;
> The little dog laughed
> To see such sport,
> And the dish ran away with the spoon.

If we ask, "Do you like this poem?" they say, "Yes!" If we ask, "What does it mean?" they say, "I don't know." A few of the more pedagogically minded ones, in order to help us slow-witted adults understand the nursery rhyme, might say something like, "It means a great big cow jumped this high up in the air and went all the way over the top of the moon," and then look at us hopefully, as if to say, "Get it?" But we probably wouldn't.

Children seem to get nursery rhymes because they don't think about them. They receive them -- in a state of utterly nonjudgmental and unthinking openness few self-respecting adults are capable of achieving.

If Jung is right, even partly right, when he suggests that art, like nature, "simply is and 'means' nothing beyond that," then the way to take in a work of art is similar to the way we take in nature: by turning off the mind ("Yes, but what does it mean?") and turning on the body. Of course,

this is easier said than done, and more easily done with some works of art than with others. But if the purpose of literary art is the communication of felt experience, then this body-centered approach should work with any poem, even the most apparently intractable. I would like to demonstrate this, briefly, with three "difficult" modern poems: Eliot's The Waste Land, Stevens' "Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird," and Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow."

Three Difficult Modern Poems

Everything about The Waste Land seems to deny that physical apprehension precedes intellectual comprehension. The poem is sprinkled with quotes in Latin, Italian, French, German, and Sanskrit and with other references to ancient and modern works of literature and philosophy, both Occidental and Oriental -- and its allusive method of presentation seems to presume a familiarity with this vast body of learning. As an aid to those of us who lack this familiarity, Eliot published the poem with fifty footnotes. And we, reading this intellectually formidable work, fall headlong into its trap. We think we need to understand those footnotes so we can identify those allusions in order to at least superficially comprehend what The Waste Land means. How else will we ever know what Eliot was getting at?

Nearly twenty years ago, after half a dozen years of trying to explain The Waste Land to my American Literature classes, I quit teaching it, convinced that it was too hard for them to learn and for me to teach. Then about five years ago, while half-heartedly looking at some music videos my twelve-year-old son wanted me to see on MTV, I realized the obvious: The Waste Land is hard to teach simply because, being a work of art, it is not accessible to an approach that is primarily intellectual. If The Waste Land were a song, instead of trying to teach it by explaining it, we

would make a music video of it. It would play on MTV. Our students -- the same ones who don't "get" modern poetry -- would see it and get it and even like it. That is, instead of failing to comprehend it, they would succeed in apprehending it. Here is a stanza they would instantly apprehend:

> A woman drew her long black hair out tight
> And fiddled whisper music on those strings
> And bats with baby faces in the violet light
> Whistled, and beat their wings
> And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
> And upside down in air were towers
> Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
> And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted
> wells.

Like a particularly disturbing dream we can neither understand nor forget, these lines fill us with foreboding: something apparently apocalyptic is happening or about to happen. How do we come to this realization? Not by discovering the meaning of these lines, but simply by receiving what they send.

I have selected this particular stanza from The Waste Land because it illustrates the point I wish to make. If I had not chosen this stanza, I could just as well have chosen the one immediately before it ("What is that sound high in the air/Murmur of maternal lamentation/Who are those hooded hordes swarming/Over the endless plain, stumbling in cracked earth") or the one immediately following it ("In this decayed hole among the mountains/In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing/Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel/There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home") or any one of a number of others. They are all more physical than we have imagined, because imagination requires image-ination -- and we have forgotten, in our pursuit of the meaning of this elusive and allusive poem, to image to ourselves, and therefore to appropriate as our own, the physical body of experience it presents.

Because we teach poetry by focusing on meaning, The Waste Land is frustrating; there is so much that must be said about it. Stevens' "Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird," on the other hand, is frustrating because there is apparently so little one can say about it. The poem consists of thirteen brief haiku-like fragments presented in no discernible order. Like a recurring motif, the word blackbird is present in each of them. Moreover, in many of them the blackbird seems to be a physical presence, a center of focus around which a brief scene is sketched. What does the poem mean? Are there really thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird? If we answer these questions for our students, we driving the wedge of meaning (and not just generalized meaning, but The Meaning) between them and the poem. Instead, they should be encouraged to enter it, to walk about in it "Among twenty snowy mountains" where "The only moving thing/Was the eye of the blackbird." Only then will they begin to see how physical it is: how it zooms from a wide-angle picture-postcard shot of a panoramic scene to a very tightly focused close-up of "the eye of the blackbird." Against all that vast motionlessness: one tiny moving thing.

"Yes, but what does it mean?"

"Perhaps art has no 'meaning,' at least not as we understand meaning. Perhaps it is like nature, which simply is and 'means' nothing beyond that."

Other sections of "Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird" are as visual as the "Among twenty snowy mountains" stanza and are also highly evocative, affecting us in ways hard to describe: "At the sight of blackbirds/Flying in a green light,/Even the bawds of euphony/Would cry out sharply." The image is a remarkable combination of the humorous and the haunting. Stevens is criticizing poets who sacrifice all else to sweet, melodic sounds. But the criticism is presented in the language of art: immediate, body-centered language aimed at the senses. Whatever else "Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird" is,

it is first and foremost a richly physical poem. But it is written, of necessity, in words; and words, of course, have meanings; and once again we find ourselves on the merry-go-round of meaning, trying so hard to catch the horse just ahead of us ("A horse is a symbol of instinct, right?") that we forget to enjoy the ride; soon after which, we forget even taking the ride. And why not? We were not physically present -- not really -- all during the ride. No wonder the memory of its physical presence does not stay with us.

Artists whose medium is not language do not have to contend with this specter of meaning; not to the extent that literary artists do. When a painter paints a picture of a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens, we like its homeyness and know, without having to think about what it means, that we "get" the painting. But when a poet says, "so much depends," we scratch our heads and knit our brows and purse our lips, as if to say, "I don't get it and I don't like it." The reason for this discrepancy is obvious. We respond to a painting physically (the immediate experience) but respond to a poem verbally (the underlying meaning). Intentionally or not, we teach our students to do the same. They read a poem in search of The Meaning, certain that it is there somewhere, certain that we teachers know exactly what it is, certain that we will sooner or later quit being coy and tell them, and certain that they will never have to wonder about (or read?) the poem again.

To combat these certainties, we need to extricate ourselves from the role of Keepers Of The Meaning and to turn poems over to our students. Any activity we devise, as long as it motivates them to explore their own way into a poem until they begin to imaginatively experience it, will serve this purpose. There are hundreds of such activities. Many of them seem simple -- elementary, even. Most are fairly commonplace. Nonetheless, they work. Here are three.

Three Simple Body-Centered Approaches

Draw a picture of the poem. One way to do this is to have a student volunteer to draw on the blackboard any visual element that the rest of the class finds in the poem. The less artistic ability the student has, the better the drawing will be, because it will illustrate, starkly and without any infusion of "artistic style," the highly visual character of many poems. More than that, having a student at the blackboard, ready to draw whatever the rest of the class suggestss, stimulates students to actively look at the poem.

Approached this way, "Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird" ceases to be a puzzling poem. Students finally stop wondering what blackbirds symbolize and start doing what Stevens so clearly directs us to do: looking.

Just as otherwise puzzling poems can become obvious when drawn on the board, so, sometimes, do previously obvious poems -- for example, Frost's "Stopping By Woods On Snowy Evening" -- reveal a puzzling depth. After noting all the specifics, both those present in the poem (horse, sleigh -- which is not actually named --, "I," road, woods, snow, frozen lake, etc.) and those named but not actually seen in the poem (the absent landowner, his house, the village, the person or people to whom "I" has promises to keep, etc.), a class is sometimes able to stand back, to visually apprehend that portion of the poem capable of being drawn on the board, and to begin seeing things we don't ordinarily think of as being visual.

I suggest only three. First: they can see that the "I" of the poem is physically isolated. Off the road to one side is the woods; off to the other side is the frozen lake; far down the road in one direction is the village; and far down the road in the other (or is it the same?) direction are those to whom "I" -- at a standstill between these four things -- has promises to keep.

Second: except when interrupted by fear of discovery or call of duty, "I" has little inclination to move down the road in either direction toward the human community. Instead, he stands off to the side, staring down a road less traveled by, where something "lovely, dark and deep," but never quite defined, seems to beckon. "What does it mean?" students sometimes ask. "Is it about death?" Faced with such questions, I prefer to let them reach their own conclusions no matter how much they may differ from mine.

Third: what so transfixes "I" is not merely pretty or picturesque -- not if we really see what "I" sees: the woods "fill up with snow." Of course, "fill up" is hyperbole, but not outright falsehood. What "I" sees is the dark, dense actuality of the woods being slowly annihilated by snow.

No wonder Frost's critics, over the years, have suspected great depth beneath the surface details of his poems. The depth is there, all right: on the page, in those surface details. All one needs to do is to see: to take in, through the senses, the experience Frost presents.

Make a video of the poem. Even a brief five- to ten-minute video of an apparently simple poem takes a long time to complete. Since it probably cannot be filmed during class time, the actual making of it will allow little opportunity for the give-and-take of class discussion. A less time-consuming, more student-interacting way to make a video is to have the class, working as a committee of the whole, informally script an imaginary video. Although the final product will never be translated onto film, the script must be detailed enough so that anyone reading it can easily see the poem projected on that mental movie screen we call the mind's eye.

Poems presenting a moment of stasis can be more fully visualized if they are drawn on the blackboard, but kinetic poems almost require this imaginary-video approach. Viewed as a series of shifting images never at rest, such poems are

often more reader-friendly than they seem to be when we try to derive a meaning from them.

Stevens' "Domination Of Black" is a good example. In it a number of disparate images experienced earlier in the day ("The colors of the bushes/And of the fallen leaves," "the leaves themselves/Turning in the wind," "the color of the heavy hemlocks," "the cry of the peacocks," "The color of their tails") come to mind as the "I" of the poem sits staring into a fire at night. But they don't come back as a succession of separate images. kaleidoscopically, they fuse with and call forth each other as the flickering flames, reflected on the walls of the room, seem to swirl about, recalling the way the fallen leaves had swirled earlier in the day. This kaleidoscopic-surrealistic quality begins gradually in the opening stanza, climaxes in the powerful second stanza, and comes to an open-ended resolution in the concluding stanza. All this is visible in the poem, right there on the page. Students see these things for themselves when we successfully motivate them to look.

Perform the poem as if it were a play. Some poems -- Housman's "Is My Team Ploughing," Reed's "Naming Of Parts," and to a lesser extent Frost's "Home Burial," for example -- are dramatic dialogues that easily lend themselves to performance. Others -- such as Pound's "The Seafarer," "Sestina: Altaforte," and "The River Merchant's Wife" and Eliot's "The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock" -- being dramatic monologues, also lend themselves to performance. In a broader sense, almost every poem is a dramatic monologue -- even those in which character does not seem to be present.

Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a good example. The poem has four stanzas, but students typically concentrate on the last three, entirely ignore the first one, and then complain that the poem seems to be lacking something. What it lacks, when the opening stanza is ignored, is that

all-important statement of value. But dramatizing the poem -- acting it out as if it were a play -- foregrounds the stanza ordinarily overlooked: someone somewhere is doing something, even if only standing and looking and ruminating, and is moved to speak these words. That is, although the image of

> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens

holds no value for most of us, it matters to the speaker of this poem. These words are "in character." They help to present a character for whom "so much depends."

A blackboard drawing will help students "see" this poem only if the drawing includes the speaker. Because the poem is static rather than kinetic, making an imaginary video will not be particularly revealing. But acting out the poem necessarily objectifies the mis-en-scene: the immediate surround in which a character is located and in relation to which character defines itself.

These three ways of exploring poems by involving students actively in the exploration are elementary. They or variations of them have been around for a long time. Such longevitiy is a testimony to the fact that they work. They turn classrooms into participatory -- and necessarily chaotic -- democracies in which students, without realizing it, begin to teach themselves and each other.